



Beyond the Barracks: Diffuse Militarisation and the Future of Democratic Governance in Uganda

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Abstract

How does militarisation undermine democratic governance without replacing civilian government through a coup? Conventional civil-military relations scholarship has concentrated on coups, military rule and the institutional subordination of the armed forces. More recent research has examined police militarisation, securitised development and coercion under electoral authoritarianism, but these literatures often analyse the military, police, courts, elections and public administration as separate arenas. This article develops the concept of diffuse militarisation to explain how military personnel, coercive authority, command practices and security rationalities migrate across formally civilian institutions while constitutional government and periodic elections remain in place. Uganda is an analytically important case because the National Resistance Movement (NRM) has combined military professionalisation, electoral institutions and sustained civilian rule with an expanding military presence in electoral management, policing, justice, economic governance, public administration and political succession. Drawing on qualitative documentary analysis of legislation, court decisions, election-observation reports, official documents, peer-reviewed scholarship, policy reports and triangulated media reporting from 1986 to July 2026, the article identifies four mutually reinforcing mechanisms: institutional fusion, functional substitution, juridification of coercion and personalised command. The analysis shows that militarisation is not merely an episodic response to insecurity. It has become a mode of regime maintenance that redistributes authority away from accountable civilian institutions, raises the costs of opposition organisation and converts political contestation into a security problem. The Ugandan case extends comparative debates by showing that professionalisation and militarisation may proceed together, and that the democratic danger lies not only in direct military intervention but also in the gradual normalisation of military power within ostensibly civilian governance. Demilitarisation therefore requires institutional boundary restoration, civilian oversight, police reform, judicial autonomy and credible constitutional succession rather than the simple withdrawal of soldiers to barracks.

Keywords: civil-military relations; diffuse militarisation; democratic governance; electoral authoritarianism; Uganda; UPDF; political succession

INTRODUCTION

The classical image of militarised politics is the coup d'état: soldiers seize broadcasting stations, suspend the constitution and replace civilian leaders with a military council. Although coups have re-emerged in parts of Africa, this image is too narrow to capture how military power affects many contemporary political regimes. Militarisation can advance without the formal displacement of civilian institutions. Governments may continue to hold elections, operate parliaments and maintain courts while military actors, practices and coercive rationalities progressively shape how those institutions work. The central democratic question is therefore no longer only whether soldiers govern directly, but also how military power becomes embedded in civilian governance.

Uganda illustrates this problem with unusual clarity. The National Resistance Army (NRA) captured state power in January 1986 after a five-year guerrilla war. The new government promised a “fundamental change,” reconstructed a state devastated by conflict and later presided over the adoption of the 1995



Constitution. The Uganda People's Defence Forces (UPDF) subsequently developed considerable operational capacity and became a significant contributor to regional security operations. Yet the military remained central to the political order produced by the liberation struggle. The formal restoration of multiparty competition in 2005 did not dissolve this relationship. Instead, the military and other security agencies became increasingly visible in elections, crowd control, public administration, economic programmes, civilian justice and debates about presidential succession (Reuss, 2018; Tapscott, 2021).

The 15 January 2026 general election demonstrated the contemporary significance of these trends. The Electoral Commission declared President Yoweri Museveni the winner of a seventh elected term with 71.65% of the vote, against 24.72% for National Unity Platform (NUP) candidate Robert Kyagulanyi Ssentamu. The result was rejected by the NUP. Election observers and rights organisations documented an internet shutdown, restrictions on political and civic activity, intimidation, arrests and security-force deployments that weakened public confidence in the electoral process (African Union et al., 2026; Human Rights Watch, 2026a). In the post-election period, the Chief of Defence Forces publicly reported the detention of 2,000 opposition supporters and the killing of 30 persons described as NUP "terrorists," illustrating how electoral conflict was narrated through the language of counterinsurgency rather than ordinary partisan competition (Reuters, 2026a).

The persistence of coercive governance was underscored in July 2026 when Besigye collapsed during his civilian treason trial after prolonged detention, intensifying concern about his health, due process and the treatment of political opponents (Reuters, 2026b). The incident did not by itself establish the wider allegations against the government, but it demonstrated how militarised arrest, military prosecution and subsequent civilian proceedings can form a continuous coercive process rather than separate legal episodes.

The military's political reach is equally apparent beyond elections. Civilians have repeatedly been prosecuted before military courts. In January 2025, the Supreme Court held that the General Court Martial lacked jurisdiction to try civilians and ordered pending civilian trials transferred to ordinary courts (Attorney General v. Kabaziguruka, 2025). Parliament subsequently enacted the Uganda Peoples' Defence Forces (Amendment) Act 2025, which reintroduced military jurisdiction over civilians in specified military-related circumstances. Military officers and units have also been assigned roles in agriculture, fisheries, environmental protection, industrial production, emergency response and other areas ordinarily administered by civilian agencies (Namwase et al., 2024). Meanwhile, the appointment of President Museveni's son, General Muhoozi Kainerugaba, as Chief of Defence Forces, coupled with his political interventions and threats against opposition figures, has made the relationship between militarisation, personal rule and succession increasingly difficult to ignore (Goldring & Tapscott, 2026).

These developments have generated important scholarship. Studies have examined constitutionalism and militarism (Asiimwe, 2016), the politicisation and professionalisation of the UPDF (Reuss, 2018), arbitrary governance and coercive control (Tapscott, 2021), militarised policing and public-interest litigation (Namwase, 2021), militarised public-health responses (Khisra & Rwengabo, 2024; Nkuubi, 2020; Parker et al., 2022), the securitisation of development (Fisher & Anderson, 2015), military involvement in public administration and economic sectors (Karamagi & Nkwatsibwe, 2024; Namwase et al., 2024), and autocratic succession (Goldring & Tapscott, 2026; Wilkins & Vokes, 2023). Ugandan public commentary and policy analysis have also long warned that no meaningful democracy can depend so heavily on military authority (International Service for Human Rights, 2025; Oloka-Onyango, 2011). This literature provides indispensable empirical and conceptual foundations. However, it tends to examine particular institutions or policy sectors separately, or to frame the problem primarily through civil-military relations, human rights, policing, public administration or authoritarian resilience.

This article departs from that literature by treating these apparently separate developments as manifestations of a single cross-institutional process. It introduces diffuse militarisation, defined as the progressive migration of military actors, coercive authority, command practices and security rationalities into formally civilian arenas, without necessarily displacing civilian institutions or terminating electoral rule. This concept directs attention from the institutional military alone to the reorganisation of governance around

military power. It also clarifies how professionalisation and militarisation can occur simultaneously: an armed force may become more technically capable and internally organised while also becoming more deeply embedded in partisan, administrative and judicial life.

The article asks three questions. First, through what mechanisms has militarisation spread across Uganda's formally civilian institutions? Second, how has this process interacted with electoral authoritarianism and regime maintenance? Third, what does the Ugandan case contribute to comparative debates on civil-military relations and democratic backsliding? The argument is that Uganda's militarisation operates through four mutually reinforcing mechanisms: institutional fusion, which blurs the boundaries among the ruling movement, executive and security establishment; functional substitution, through which military actors assume civilian administrative and policing responsibilities; juridification of coercion, which uses law and military justice to regularise exceptional power; and personalised command, which connects coercive institutions to presidential and familial authority. Together, these mechanisms reduce horizontal accountability, raise the organisational costs of opposition and transform political disagreement into a security threat.

The article proceeds in six parts. The first reviews comparative literature on militarisation, civil-military relations and authoritarian governance. The second explains the concept of diffuse militarisation and the article's point of departure. The third outlines the documentary research design. The fourth situates contemporary militarisation in Uganda's historical and institutional development. The fifth analyses its electoral, policing, judicial, administrative and succession dimensions. The sixth discusses comparative implications and reforms required to restore democratic civilian authority.

LITERATURE REVIEW

From Coups to the Diffusion of Military Power

Civil-military relations scholarship has long asked how societies can maintain armed forces strong enough to defend the state without allowing them to dominate political life. Huntington's (1957) model of "objective civilian control" located the solution in professional military autonomy under civilian political direction. Janowitz (1960) instead emphasised the military's growing social and political integration and the emergence of a constabulary force. Finer (1962) focused more directly on the conditions under which armed forces intervene in politics. Although these works remain foundational, their principal concern was the institutional military and the possibility of overt intervention. They were less well equipped to explain military influence that spreads through civilian institutions while civilian incumbents remain in office.

Later scholarship complicated the professionalisation thesis. Feaver (2003) conceptualised civil-military relations as a principal-agent problem, highlighting monitoring and the possibility of military "shirking." Desch (1999) linked civilian control to the external and internal threat environment. Studies of authoritarian regimes showed that rulers do not merely seek civilian control; they seek regime control over coercive institutions. They use counterbalancing, parallel forces, selective promotion and ethnic or familial recruitment to reduce coup risks, often at the expense of military effectiveness and institutional autonomy (De Bruin, 2020; Escribà-Folch et al., 2020; Pilster & Böhmelt, 2012; Roessler, 2011). This literature helps explain personalisation and coup-proofing but still tends to treat military intrusion as a problem located primarily inside the coercive apparatus.

Militarisation scholarship casts a wider net. Militarisation refers not only to military expenditure or the numerical strength of the armed forces, but also to the growing social authority of military values, practices and institutional forms (Enloe, 2000; Kraska, 2007; Lutz, 2002). Bayer et al. (2025) distinguish material, political and societal dimensions: resources devoted to armed institutions, military influence over political decision-making, and the social reach of military norms. This multidimensional approach is important because a country may experience declining coup risk while military influence expands in policy, policing, culture and administration.

Research in developed democracies demonstrates that militarisation is not confined to postcolonial or authoritarian states. In the United States, the expansion of special weapons and tactics units, military equipment transfers and a “warrior” orientation has blurred the boundary between civilian policing and military operations (Kraska, 2007). Militarised police deployments do not reliably improve officer safety or reduce crime but can damage public trust and increase coercive encounters (Delehanty et al., 2017; Lawson, 2019; Mummolo, 2018). Staniland (2020) further shows how armed non-state mobilisation, politicised federal law enforcement and demands for domestic military deployment can pull military logics into partisan politics. The American case is institutionally different from Uganda, but it demonstrates a general proposition: democratic erosion can occur when military methods and security narratives become acceptable tools for managing ordinary political disagreement.

Latin American research similarly shows that militarised law enforcement can expand under elected civilian governments. Faced with organised crime and weak police capacity, governments have deployed armed forces to perform domestic policing. The resulting “constabularisation” of the military undermines police reform, legal accountability, citizen security and human rights (Flores-Macías & Zarkin, 2021). Quantitative evidence from Mexico links militarised policing to increased allegations of torture, disappearance and other abuses (Flores-Macías & Zarkin, 2024). These findings caution against equating civilian initiation of military deployment with democratic control. Elected leaders may themselves be the principal agents of militarisation.

Africa: Beyond the Coup d’État

Early African civil-military scholarship was strongly shaped by the coups and military regimes that followed independence. Decalo (1990), First (1970) and Mazrui (1975) examined praetorian politics, military ethnocracy and the social foundations of army intervention. Luckham’s (1994) seminal review warned against reducing militarisation to coups, arguing that military power was embedded in state formation, economic relations and international dependency. Hutchful and Bathily (1998) similarly proposed the broader notion of “politico-military relations,” which captures military influence across civilian rule, direct military government and state collapse.

The decline of successful coups in the first decades after the Cold War initially encouraged optimism that democratic reform and military professionalisation were consolidating civilian supremacy. Yet the apparent retreat of military regimes did not necessarily mean the political retreat of militaries. Day et al. (2020) argue that African civil-military relations should be analysed beyond the coup, across a spectrum of political authority and coercive power. Post-rebel regimes are especially important. Movements that seize power through armed struggle often construct disciplined forces and formal institutions but retain liberation narratives, partisan military identities and personalised command structures (Vrieze, 2024). In such settings, political professionalisation—the ideological integration of the force with a ruling project—may coexist with technical professionalisation.

African regimes also operate within an international security economy. Counterterrorism, peacekeeping and regional stabilisation partnerships can strengthen coercive institutions while reducing external pressure for domestic democratisation. Fisher and Anderson (2015) show how Uganda strategically positioned itself as a security partner, converting regional military activism into international legitimacy and assistance. This “securitisation of development” creates incentives for donors to prioritise order and military cooperation over political accountability. Across the continent, militarisation has also been associated with institutional weakness, corruption and adverse democratic and developmental outcomes (Bonga & Mahuku, 2022). Militarisation is therefore not simply a domestic institutional pathology; it is embedded in domestic political economies and transnational bargains.

Militarisation and Electoral Authoritarianism

Research on competitive or electoral authoritarianism explains how formal democratic institutions can coexist with systematic incumbent advantage. Such regimes hold elections that are meaningful enough to organise opposition and generate uncertainty, but unfair enough to prevent fully democratic competition

(Levitsky & Way, 2010). Rulers combine co-optation, legitimization and repression (Gerschewski, 2013). Coercive capacity matters not only on election day but throughout the political cycle: it regulates assembly, media, opposition organisation, litigation and protest.

Uganda has been widely characterised as a hybrid, competitive-authoritarian or electoral-authoritarian regime (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2026; Bareebe, 2026). The NRM's durability rests on more than force. It has built organisational networks, distributed patronage, maintained rural support, fragmented opponents and adapted institutions to new political challenges (Khisa, 2024; Rubongoya, 2007; Tapscott, 2021). Yet coercion remains central to this repertoire. The crucial issue is not whether every political outcome is produced by military power, but how the availability and selective deployment of coercion structures the choices of citizens, officials and opposition organisations.

Democratic-backsliding scholarship provides a related insight. Contemporary autocratisation often proceeds incrementally through elected executives who weaken referees, rewrite rules and constrain opponents rather than abolishing institutions in a single rupture (Bermeo, 2016; Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019). Militarisation can reinforce this process by insulating executive power from civilian checks. However, backsliding literature generally treats security agencies as instruments of executive aggrandisement rather than analysing how military authority diffuses across governance itself. This is the conceptual space addressed here.

Point of Departure: Diffuse Militarisation

Existing Uganda scholarship establishes five important propositions. First, the UPDF is simultaneously professionalised, politicised and personalised (Reuss, 2018). Second, arbitrary and fragmented coercion is a deliberate mode of social control rather than simply evidence of state weakness (Tapscott, 2021). Third, militarised policing weakens rights protection and civilian accountability (Namwase, 2021). Fourth, security logics have expanded into development, public health, economic production and administration (Fisher & Anderson, 2015; Khisa & Rwengabo, 2024; Namwase et al., 2024). Fifth, succession increasingly links military command to familial and personal rule (Goldring & Tapscott, 2026).

What remains insufficiently theorised is the relationship among these developments. Sector-specific analysis can obscure their cumulative effect. Police militarisation may be treated as a law-enforcement problem, military courts as a fair-trial problem, military-run economic programmes as a public-administration problem, and a serving general's political interventions as a succession problem. Diffuse militarisation brings them into the same analytical field.

Diffuse militarisation has four defining features. First, it is cross-institutional: authority migrates among the armed forces, police, courts, ministries, economic agencies and electoral institutions. Second, it is incremental: exceptional deployments become precedents and precedents become normal governance. Third, it is civilian-enabled: executive appointments, legislation, budgets and administrative directives often authorise military expansion. Fourth, it is regime-selective: coercive power is not applied uniformly but is most intense where political control, resources or succession are contested.

The concept does not imply that all military participation in civilian affairs is illegitimate. Armed forces may lawfully assist in disasters, public-health emergencies or severe internal-security crises. Nor does it treat every soldier as a partisan political actor. The analytical test is whether military involvement is limited in time and mandate; authorised by clear law; subordinate to accountable civilian institutions; subject to independent investigation and judicial review; and applied without partisan discrimination. Militarisation deepens as these safeguards weaken.

The proposed causal logic is cumulative. Institutional fusion ensures that threats to the incumbent or ruling movement are interpreted as threats to the state. Functional substitution weakens civilian agencies and makes continued military intervention appear necessary. Juridification converts exceptional coercion into routine statutory power. Personalised command reduces the autonomy of coercive institutions and connects security decisions to individual or familial political interests. These mechanisms produce a self-reinforcing

cycle: militarised solutions weaken civilian capacity; weakened capacity justifies further militarisation; legal changes regularise the expansion; and personalised control directs it toward regime survival.

RESEARCH METHOD

This article uses qualitative documentary analysis and process tracing to examine the evolution of militarisation from the NRM's accession to power in 1986 to July 2026. Uganda is selected as an analytically revealing case rather than a representative sample of all African regimes. It combines constitutional civilian government, repeated multiparty elections, a professionalising post-rebel army, extensive regional security engagement and no peaceful presidential transfer since independence. These characteristics permit analysis of how militarisation operates without a conventional military takeover.

The evidence base consists of six source categories. The first is constitutional and statutory law, including the 1995 Constitution, the UPDF legal framework and the Uganda Peoples' Defence Forces (Amendment) Act 2025. The second comprises judicial decisions, particularly litigation on military jurisdiction and the use of force. The third includes official and quasi-official records, such as parliamentary materials and election-observation reports. The fourth consists of peer-reviewed scholarship and scholarly books on civil-military relations, political policing, militarised governance, authoritarianism and succession. The fifth includes policy and human-rights reports from Ugandan and international organisations. The sixth consists of professionally reported news and analytical commentary used to reconstruct recent events that have not yet generated extensive peer-reviewed research.

Documents were read iteratively and coded around institutional arena, actor, legal mandate, mode of intervention, stated justification, target, oversight mechanism and democratic consequence. Initial descriptive codes—elections, policing, military justice, public administration, economic governance and succession—were compared across time. A second analytical cycle grouped recurring processes into the four mechanisms of institutional fusion, functional substitution, juridification and personalised command.

Triangulation was essential because claims about coercion are politically contested. The article distinguishes among court findings, official statements, documented events and allegations. Claims of torture, abduction or electoral misconduct are attributed to the reporting organisation or claimant unless independently established. Media reports are used when they contain attributable statements, identifiable dates or facts corroborated across sources. Blogs and advocacy websites are treated as contemporary commentary, not as equivalent to peer-reviewed research.

The design has limitations. Documentary analysis cannot establish the private intentions of political and military leaders, and restricted access to security institutions limits direct observation. The article therefore makes a mechanism-based interpretive argument rather than claiming a definitive measurement of the causal effect of militarisation on democracy. It also concentrates on national-level governance; the local experience of militarisation varies across regions and social groups. Nevertheless, the convergence of legal, institutional, electoral and administrative evidence supports a robust analysis of the direction and cumulative consequences of militarisation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Historical Foundations of Uganda's Militarised Political Order

Uganda's coercive state did not begin with the NRM. The colonial administration relied on conquest, indirect rule and security institutions designed to control subjects rather than serve equal citizens. At independence, the army and police inherited weak national legitimacy and strong political and regional cleavages. The 1966 constitutional crisis, including the military assault on the Lubiri, established force as an arbiter of disputes at the centre of the state. Idi Amin's 1971 coup then produced direct military rule, institutional destruction and extensive violence. The unstable post-Amin transition and disputed 1980 election again linked electoral conflict to armed power (Asiimwe, 2016; Karamagi & Nkwatsibwe, 2024; Mamdani, 2025; Mazrui, 1975).

The NRA's 1986 victory emerged from this history but also promised to overcome it. The NRM presented itself as a disciplined liberation movement correcting sectarianism, military indiscipline and elite manipulation. Its early broad-based government, local council structures and constitution-making process generated substantial legitimacy. The 1995 Constitution established a formally democratic order and required the UPDF to be non-partisan, national in character, professional and subordinate to civilian authority (Constitution of the Republic of Uganda, 1995, art. 208).

The liberation settlement nevertheless contained an enduring ambiguity. The army was reconstructed as a national institution, yet it was also understood as the historic guardian of the NRM revolution. Political education tied military professionalism to the movement's ideology. Former combatants occupied positions across the state. The "Movement" system restricted party competition while presenting the NRM as an all-inclusive national arrangement. These features created what may call the simultaneous politicisation and professionalisation of the armed forces.

The restoration of multiparty politics in 2005 changed the formal environment but not the foundations of coercive power. Presidential term limits were removed in the same year, and the presidential age limit was removed in 2017. Elections became more competitive, particularly with Kizza Besigye's challenges and the later emergence of Kyagulanyi, but they also became increasingly securitised. The NRM's revolutionary legitimacy gradually weakened, increasing the importance of patronage and coercion (Rubongoya, 2007).

The international environment reinforced this trajectory. Uganda's role in regional military operations and counterterrorism made it a valued Western security partner. Fisher and Anderson (2015) argue that the government successfully securitised development by presenting military assistance to Uganda as serving donor security interests. Regional deployments have built genuine military capability and produced public goods, but they have also strengthened the bargaining position of the security establishment and reduced the external costs of domestic authoritarianism.

The Mechanisms and Arenas of Diffuse Militarisation

Institutional Fusion and Militarised Elections

Institutional fusion occurs when distinctions among the state, ruling party, presidency and security institutions become blurred. In a democratic order, security agencies protect the constitutional process and apply the same law to all competitors. In a fused order, opposition to the ruling party is more readily interpreted as hostility to the state or the security of the country.

Uganda's elections reveal this process. The military does not formally administer the ballot, but it has become a recurrent and highly visible actor in the electoral environment. Security deployments, joint operations, arrests, restrictions on rallies and the use of force shape opposition mobilisation before votes are cast. The problem is not deployment per se: credible threats may require security preparation. The democratic concern arises from selective enforcement, disproportionate force and limited accountability.

The November 2020 protests following Kyagulanyi's arrest were a decisive episode. More than 50 people were killed during the security response, according to official and independent reporting. The state defended its actions as necessary to restore order; rights organisations documented unlawful force and the absence of credible accountability (Human Rights Watch, 2021; Namwase, 2021). During the 2021 election, extensive military deployment, arrests of NUP supporters and Kyagulanyi's post-election confinement reinforced the perception that the opposition competed not only against the NRM but against the coercive state.

Similar patterns preceded the 2026 election. Bareebe and Ashaba (2025) described heightened militarisation and repression as coercion and administrative control became integral to the electoral environment. During the campaign, Kyagulanyi appeared in protective equipment after repeated confrontations with security forces. The government maintained that security operations responded to unlawful conduct and threats of violence. Yet the cumulative record—rally obstruction, arrests, civil-society restrictions, military deployment and an internet shutdown—reduced the conditions for open competition (African Union et al., 2026; Human Rights Watch, 2026a; Roque, 2026).

The post-election language was particularly revealing. General Kainerugaba's announcement that 2,000 NUP supporters had been detained and 30 killed framed opposition supporters as terrorists (Reuters, 2026a). This counterinsurgency vocabulary collapses the distinction between political opposition and armed enemies. It also shifts authority away from ordinary civilian processes: a serving military commander appears as the principal narrator of arrests, deaths and political order.

The fusion is institutionalised symbolically through the UPDF's ten parliamentary representatives. The arrangement originated in the Movement system and is defended as a mechanism for representing a historically important institution. In a multiparty legislature, however, corporate military representation creates a structural contradiction. The armed forces are constitutionally non-partisan and subordinate to civilian authority, yet participate directly in the body responsible for civilian oversight of defence. Their presence is not the principal cause of executive dominance in Parliament, but it normalises the military as a political constituency rather than an impartial national institution.

Functional Substitution and the Militarisation of Policing

Functional substitution occurs when military institutions assume tasks formally assigned to civilian agencies. It is often justified by the weakness, corruption or ineffectiveness of those agencies. The substitution may initially improve speed or enforcement capacity, but repeated military deployment can further weaken civilian institutions by diverting resources, authority and political confidence from them.

The relationship between the UPDF and Uganda Police Force is central. Uganda's police have undergone militarisation through leadership patterns, training, equipment, joint operations and an organisational orientation that treats crowd management as a security operation. This does not mean that every police function is military or that the police have ceased to perform ordinary law enforcement. Rather, political policing has increasingly drawn on military personnel and coercive practices, particularly during elections and protests (Namwase, 2021).

Comparative evidence helps explain the democratic consequences. Police and military institutions have different primary mandates, training and accountability structures. Police are expected to prevent crime, gather admissible evidence and use minimum necessary force under continuous civilian law. Armed forces are organised to defeat threats through superior force. When the latter model migrates into policing, citizens can be recast as enemies and public gatherings as battle spaces (Flores-Macías & Zarkin, 2021; Kraska, 2007).

Uganda's joint police-military operations make lines of responsibility difficult to trace. Namwase (2021) shows that unclear rules governing the use of force and firearms undermine the rights to life, assembly and effective remedy. Litigation can secure important declarations, but judgments have frequently been implemented incompletely. The resulting accountability gap is institutional: police may point to joint-command arrangements, while military actors operate within structures less accessible to civilian complaints.

The apparent withdrawal or weakening of ordinary police capacity also matters. Where citizens increasingly encounter soldiers or military-led units in civilian law enforcement, police legitimacy and competence can deteriorate. Reports that police were "disappearing" from public enforcement roles reflected concern that military actors had become the default response to political and security problems (Anadolu Agency, 2022). Militarisation therefore does not simply add force; it reorganises the civilian security field.

Juridification: Military Courts and the Legalisation of Exception

Militarisation is sometimes presented as the opposite of law. In contemporary authoritarian governance, however, coercion is often juridified: exceptional authority is translated into statutes, regulations, charges and formally constituted tribunals. Law does not disappear; it is reshaped to widen coercive discretion.

Uganda's military courts illustrate this process. Civilians, including opposition supporters, have been prosecuted for alleged possession of military stores, firearms and other offences. The state's position has been that civilians who involve themselves in military-related offences should be subject to military law. Critics contend that courts martial are disciplinary organs whose members lack the institutional independence and security of tenure required of ordinary courts (Amnesty International, 2025; Mujuzi, 2022).

The prosecution of Besigye and Obeid Lutale brought the issue into renewed focus. Besigye disappeared while in Nairobi in November 2024 and subsequently appeared before the General Court Martial in Kampala. He was charged with firearms and security offences and later with treachery. His lawyers argued that his seizure and prosecution were unlawful and politically motivated; the government maintained that it possessed evidence of serious crimes. In January 2025, lawyer Eron Kiiza was arrested during court proceedings, summarily convicted of contempt and imprisoned. Colleagues alleged that he was assaulted and tortured, allegations denied by military officials (The Guardian, 2025).

On 31 January 2025, the Supreme Court held in *Attorney General v. Kabaziguruka* that military courts lacked jurisdiction over civilians and ordered pending cases transferred to civilian courts. The judgment reaffirmed that military tribunals are designed to enforce discipline within the armed forces and did not meet constitutional requirements of independence and impartiality for civilian criminal trials. It was a major assertion of judicial boundary-setting (Human Rights Watch, 2025b).

The legislative response demonstrated juridification. The UPDF (Amendment) Act 2025 reorganised military justice and permitted military trials of civilians in specified circumstances, including certain firearms-related offences. The government argued that the new law addressed defects identified by the Court, including the legal qualifications of military judicial officers. The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and Ugandan legal actors warned that the law preserved the fundamental problem of civilians being subjected to military jurisdiction (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2025; Parliament of Uganda, 2025).

This sequence matters theoretically. Judicial review did not simply stop militarisation; it prompted statutory redesign. The conflict moved from overt non-compliance into legal contest over the scope of military power. Juridification can make exceptional authority appear regular while retaining its political effects: alternative forums, broad security offences and coercive leverage over civilian defendants.

Functional Substitution in Public Administration and the Economy

Military participation in civilian administration has expanded across agriculture, fisheries, environmental management, industrial production, infrastructure and emergency response. Operation Wealth Creation is among the most visible examples, placing military coordinators within an agricultural programme. Military-led enforcement has also been deployed against illegal fishing, logging and other economic activities. The National Enterprise Corporation and associated military businesses give the UPDF a direct economic role.

These interventions are often justified by civilian institutional failure. Illegal fishing, environmental degradation, corruption and ineffective service delivery are real problems. Military units may deliver rapid enforcement where civilian bodies have failed. In some cases, officials have reported improved fish stocks or implementation outcomes. A serious analysis must acknowledge these claimed benefits rather than assume that military involvement is inherently ineffective.

The democratic problem concerns mandate, proportionality and accountability. Research by Namwase et al. (2024) documents military involvement in land, fisheries, agriculture, natural resources, industry, policing and public service, including allegations of violence, property destruction and opaque decision-making. Karamagi and Nkwatsibwe (2024) similarly argue that military command has penetrated public administration. When soldiers perform functions assigned to ministries, local governments or regulatory authorities, citizens may lose access to administrative review, elected representation and ordinary complaint mechanisms.

Public-health governance during COVID-19 demonstrated how pre-existing militarism shaped emergency response. Uganda's lockdown was enforced through armed deployments, and military actors participated in food distribution, medical operations and other functions. The emergency required extraordinary coordination, but excessive force and a command-centred response reflected institutional habits that preceded the pandemic (Khisa & Rwengabo, 2024; Nkuubi, 2020; Parker et al., 2022). The case shows how crisis accelerates an existing process rather than creating militarisation from nothing.

Functional substitution produces dependency. Each civilian failure creates a rationale for military intervention, but intervention can prevent the investment and institutional learning necessary to correct the failure. Civil servants become implementers of commands rather than autonomous professionals; elected local leaders lose influence; and military effectiveness in one domain is generalised into a claim of competence across unrelated domains. Over time, the public may come to view civilian deliberation as delay and military command as the only reliable form of government.

Personalised Command and the Succession Problem

Personalised command connects coercive institutions to the political survival of an individual leader or ruling family. It differs from ordinary presidential control. Democratic civilian supremacy requires elected officials to direct the military through law, collective institutions and accountable chains of command. Personalisation arises when promotion, access and operational authority depend heavily on proximity and loyalty to the ruler.

Reuss (2018) documents the UPDF's movement from politicisation and professionalisation toward increasing personalisation. Tapscott (2021) similarly shows how arbitrary governance and fragmented coercive actors preserve presidential dominance. These processes do not eliminate formal hierarchy; they place formal structures within networks of personal trust, historical combat ties and selective patronage.

The rise of General Muhoozi Kainerugaba gives personalisation a dynastic dimension. His rapid promotion, command of elite forces and appointment as Chief of Defence Forces have occurred alongside public political interventions. His social-media statements have included threats against opposition leaders and claims concerning the detention or mistreatment of political actors. In May 2025, he stated that Edward Ssebuufu, known as Eddie Mutwe and associated with Kyagulanyi's security team, was being held in his basement and suggested that he had been beaten (Human Rights Watch, 2025a). In the aftermath of the 2026 election, his statements again placed the military commander at the centre of partisan conflict.

Goldring and Tapscott (2026) show that Muhoozi is widely perceived as a likely successor but is deeply unpopular, including in the family's western home region. The succession literature usually focuses on elite management, but public legitimacy matters in electoral autocracies because an unpopular successor must rely more heavily on coercion and co-optation (Gerschewski, 2013; Goldring & Tapscott, 2026). If succession becomes associated with military command and familial inheritance, it may intensify both elite fragmentation and popular resistance.

The danger is not predetermined succession. President Museveni has not formally designated his son as successor, and Muhoozi has made changing statements about electoral ambitions. The analytical point is that the concentration of familial, political and military authority changes the succession environment. It signals that access to coercive power may be more decisive than party rules, constitutional procedure or public choice.

Discussion: Comparative and Theoretical Implications

Militarisation as a Mode of Electoral-Authoritarian Governance

The Ugandan evidence supports the argument that militarisation is not simply an episodic response to disorder. It is a mode of governance that operates across the electoral cycle and across institutional sectors. Institutional fusion casts opposition as a security threat. Functional substitution places military actors in civilian roles and weakens alternative centres of competence. Juridification converts exceptional authority into statutory and procedural form. Personalised command aligns coercive institutions with regime and succession interests.

These mechanisms complement rather than replace patronage, legitimisation and electoral organisation. The NRM has not survived for four decades through coercion alone. It has maintained significant constituencies, distributed resources, adapted its organisation and invoked memories of past insecurity. Militarisation is most effective precisely because it is embedded in a broader political settlement. The coercive apparatus raises the cost of defection and opposition while other institutions continue to provide participation, benefits and legitimacy.

This finding refines competitive-authoritarian theory. Levitsky and Way (2010) identify coercive organisational power as a central dimension of incumbent strength. The Ugandan case shows that coercive power is not only a resource held by the regime; it reshapes the institutional environment in which competition occurs. Elections become security operations, courts become arenas for managing military jurisdiction, ministries become sites of command intervention and succession becomes entangled with military hierarchy.

Professionalisation Does Not Guarantee Democratic Neutrality

The case also challenges a linear assumption linking military professionalisation to political withdrawal. Huntington's (1957) model expects professional autonomy to support objective civilian control. In Uganda, technical and organisational professionalisation has occurred alongside political integration and personalisation. The UPDF's regional operational capability is compatible with its domestic political centrality.

This is not merely a failure to complete professionalisation. It reflects a different conception of professionalism inherited from a liberation movement: the professional soldier is expected to defend both the nation and a revolutionary political project. Where the ruling movement is fused with the state, partisan loyalty can be presented as patriotic duty. Democratic reform therefore requires more than training, equipment and formal command structures; it requires a normative redefinition of military professionalism around political neutrality and constitutional loyalty.

Civilian Agency in Militarisation

The analysis further demonstrates that militarisation should not be equated with military autonomy from civilians. Many expansions of military power are initiated or legalised by civilian leaders, Parliament and ministries. The UPDF amendment, administrative deployments and military economic mandates are products of executive and legislative decisions. This parallels Latin America, where elected governments deploy armed forces domestically, and the United States, where civilian political leaders have promoted militarised policing and domestic military roles (Flores-Macías & Zarkin, 2021; Staniland, 2020).

The distinction between civilian control and democratic civilian control is therefore essential. A president may exercise strong personal control over the armed forces while Parliament, courts and citizens possess weak control. Such an arrangement prevents coups but does not secure democracy. Democratic civilian control disperses authority through law, oversight, professional norms and institutional checks.

International Security Partnerships and the Stability-Democracy Trade-Off

Uganda's international partners have often treated the government as a provider of regional security. This role has produced genuine benefits in peace operations and counterterrorism. It has also created a stability-democracy trade-off in which external actors hesitate to challenge domestic militarisation (Fisher & Anderson, 2015). Security assistance can enhance professional skills while indirectly strengthening institutions used for internal political control.

The implication is not that partners should abandon Uganda's security needs. Assistance should differentiate external defence and peacekeeping from domestic partisan deployment. Vetting, human-rights monitoring, parliamentary transparency and enforceable restrictions on units implicated in abuse are necessary to prevent external support from reinforcing diffuse militarisation.

Democratic Consequences and Pathways to Reform

Diffuse militarisation harms democracy through several cumulative effects. It narrows political participation by raising the physical and organisational risks of opposition. It weakens horizontal accountability when security actors override or evade courts, Parliament and civilian agencies. It erodes administrative accountability by replacing written procedures with command. It undermines equality before the law when political opponents encounter exceptional forums and security charges. Finally, it damages the military itself by associating a national institution with partisan rule.

Demilitarisation does not require dismantling the UPDF or denying Uganda's genuine security threats. Nor can it be achieved by a single legal reform. It requires restoring institutional boundaries while strengthening the civilian institutions expected to carry the transferred responsibilities.

First, military jurisdiction should be confined to service offences committed by persons subject to military law. Civilian defendants should be tried by ordinary courts with full constitutional safeguards. The 2025 amendment should be reviewed against the reasoning of *Attorney General v. Kabaziguruka* and Uganda's regional and international obligations.

Second, election security should be led by a professional civilian police service under public operational rules. Military assistance should be exceptional, time-bound and subject to parliamentary and judicial oversight. Independent investigations should follow every election-related death or credible allegation of torture or disappearance.

Third, Parliament should reconsider corporate military representation. Individual former soldiers retain the same political rights as other citizens, but active institutional representation sits uneasily with non-partisanship and civilian supremacy. Defence oversight committees require stronger information rights, budget scrutiny and protection from executive retaliation.

Fourth, military substitution in agriculture, fisheries, industry and public administration should be reviewed sector by sector. Programmes should identify a statutory mandate, civilian lead agency, exit timetable, complaint mechanism and audit framework. Where military involvement has produced measurable gains, those capabilities should be transferred to accountable civilian institutions rather than made permanently military.

Fifth, security-sector professionalisation should explicitly teach constitutional neutrality, human rights, civilian protection and the distinction between government, ruling party and state. Promotions and appointments should be governed by transparent professional criteria. Serving officers should not make partisan statements, campaign or threaten political actors.

Sixth, succession must be constitutionalised. Uganda's most dangerous political uncertainty is not simply who follows Museveni, but whether the rules and institutions governing transition command broad confidence. Strengthening the Electoral Commission, protecting judicial independence, restoring meaningful limitations on executive tenure and guaranteeing the security of outgoing leaders and officials would reduce incentives to treat political office as existential.

Finally, opposition parties and civil society also carry responsibilities. Democratic reform cannot be built on revenge, ethnic exclusion or the promise to replace one partisan security apparatus with another. Opposition actors should publish credible security-sector policies, protect lawful pensions and careers, reject collective blame of soldiers, document abuse carefully and commit to non-violent constitutional change. Such guarantees can reduce the fear that political transition will threaten the entire security establishment.

CONCLUSION

Uganda's militarisation is neither a simple continuation of direct military rule nor a collection of isolated security excesses. It is a diffuse process through which military actors, command practices, coercive authority and security rationalities have migrated across electoral politics, policing, justice, public administration, economic governance and succession. The process is enabled by institutional fusion, functional substitution, juridification and personalised command.

This analysis makes three contributions. Conceptually, it shifts attention from military intervention to the cross-institutional diffusion of military power. Empirically, it integrates fields that Uganda scholarship has often examined separately and traces their cumulative democratic consequences. Comparatively, it shows that professionalisation, civilian rule and militarisation can coexist. A technically capable military may remain central to authoritarian regime maintenance, and civilian leaders may be the principal architects of military expansion.

The future of democratic governance in Uganda will therefore not be secured merely by preventing a coup or holding another election. It depends on whether the country can restore the boundaries that make

constitutional government meaningful: soldiers defend the state, police enforce civilian law, courts determine guilt, public servants administer programmes, Parliament oversees the executive and citizens choose leaders without coercion. Demilitarisation is not the weakening of national security. It is the reconstruction of security as a public good governed by law rather than a political resource controlled through command.

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